

Dr. Ann's Tips for Building a Better School Lunch

A healthy school lunch should always include the following four features:

1. A healthy protein package
2. At least one piece of produce – the more the better!
3. A calcium-rich food
4. A fun food

* Note: These features can certainly overlap

Dr. Ann's Top Picks Within These 4 Essential Categories:

1. A Healthy Protein Package

- Sandwiches made with deli turkey, ham, chicken, or roast beef, egg salad from omega-3 eggs, tuna salad, and peanut butter or other nut butters and spreadable fruit.
- Always use 100% whole grain breads, and make things more interesting by substituting whole grain tortillas, bagels, pitas, or English muffins.
- Add veggies – lettuce, tomatoes, onions, pickles, sprouts, etc. where possible.

2. Produce

- Remember the deeper the color, the more health-boosting power it has.
- There are loads of kid-friendly veggies that are perfect for school lunches, including baby carrots, celery sticks, sweet bell pepper strips, cherry tomatoes, and broccoli florets.
- Kids love dips – include a small container of hummus or low-fat salad dressing for their dipping pleasure!
- Any fruit is fine, but the superstars are ideal, including berries, cherries, plums, any whole citrus, mangoes, kiwi, apples, cantaloupes, and red grapes.

3. A Calcium-Rich Food

- Cheese – avoid full-fat varieties. You can now find a wonderful array of reduced-fat cheeses on the grocery shelf, including 2% cheddar cheese in cubes, sticks, or other fun shapes, mozzarella cheese sticks, and 2% milk American cheese.
- Low-fat yogurt in spoonable, drinkable or squeezable containers.
- 2% or skim milk.
- Calcium-fortified soy milk.
- Calcium-fortified 100% orange juice.

4. Fun Foods

- A small piece of dark chocolate, like Dove Dark.
- A small bag of trail mix, a granola bar, a small box of raisins or other dried fruit, a container of their favorite healthy, dry cereal, 100% fruit sticks, baked chips, a small bag of goldfish, etc.

Other Helpful Lunch Box Tips

- Involve your child in the selection and the preparation of school lunches. This has been shown to enhance healthful eating.
- Color and variety insight eating behavior – use this to your advantage by including a variety of colorful, healthful foods. For example, instead of a bag of baby carrots, include carrots along with broccoli florets and red bell pepper strips (don't forget the fun dip).
- Whole fruits frequently end up in the trash can. Learn to cut them up and present them in fun containers or in other exciting ways. Always cut up apples, pears, oranges, etc. Squirt a bit of lemon juice over them to keep them fresh and crisp.

- Be as inventive and creative as possible. Kids love fruit kabobs. Arrange a medley of colorful chunks of fresh fruit on a skewer.
- Insulated lunch bags with a cooler pack are the safest ways to pack school lunches
- Kids love fun containers. Package nuts in Altoid containers. Take your child to the Dollar Store, and let them pick out a variety of interesting containers.
- Kids are very sensitive to the presentation of food. Keep things lively. For example, make fruit and veggie kabobs; roll up a banana cut lengthwise in a whole grain tortilla, spread with peanut butter; make a quick homemade pizza with whole grain English muffins, bottled tomato sauce and shredded part-skim mozzarella cheese.
- Keep the junk foods out! If it's not there, it's not an option.

Dr. Ann's Top Picks of the Healthiest Snacks for Kids

- Cut fresh veggies (baby carrots, celery sticks, bell pepper strips, broccoli/cauliflower florets, etc.) – serve along with a “healthy dip” like hummus, low-fat salad dressing, guacamole, or salsa.
- Low-fat yogurt – plain sweetened with blended fruit or a bit of frozen concentrated fruit juice is best. If you use low-fat fruit flavored yogurts, cut in half with plain to reduce their sugar content. Stoneyfield Farm is the healthiest brand.
- Nuts or seeds – almonds, cashews, walnuts, peanuts, etc. Don't forget about sunflower seeds and toasted pumpkin seeds.
- Fresh, frozen or dried fruit – serve cut up in an interesting cup or bowl. Even better, create a “healthful” fruit/yogurt parfait by alternating layers of fruit with low-fat yogurt and granola.
- Roasted soy nuts – try them! Most kids find them delicious.
- Reduced-fat cheese – you can now find an amazing array of cheeses made from 2% milk in lots of kid friendly packaging.
- Whole grain crackers, like Ak-mak, Kashi TLC, or Triscuits with 2% milk cheese, peanut butter, almond nut butter, hummus, salsa, or spreadable fruit.
- Healthy cereals – dry or with skim or low-fat milk. To select a healthy cereal, be sure it contains at least 3 grams of fiber per serving and that you see the word “whole” as the first word in the ingredients list.
- Instant oatmeal.
- Granola bars/Pria bars.
- Air-popped popcorn.
- Hard-boiled omega-3 fortified eggs.
- Low-fat cottage cheese with fruit.
- Stone ground tortilla chips with a healthy dip.
- Fruit smoothies made with yogurt or low-fat milk. Throw in a tablespoon of wheat germ for an additional nutrition punch.
- A piece of dark chocolate or a cup of hot cocoa made with low-fat/skim milk and “real” cocoa powder.